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The Political Potential of Soviet Equivalence

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When the dramatic expansion of Soviet strategic forces first became apparent to Western observers during the latter half of the 1960s, considerable debate arose over the objectives of that effort and its consequences for American security and international stability. Some analysts saw the buildup as manifest evidence of a Soviet determination to achieve strategic superiority over the United States and warned that with such a margin of advantage, the Soviet leaders might become emboldened toward a more adventuresome foreign policy, attempting to use their new-found strategic leverage to exact political concessions from the United States in coercive tests of strength around the world, much as the United States did against the Soviet Union during the Cuban crisis of 1962. Other analysts, perhaps the majority, questioned whether asymmetries in strategic power short of a decisive first-strike capability afforded either side any appreciable political utility under conditions of mutual deterrence. Those of this persuasion tended to interpret the Soviet buildup as merely a testament to the Soviet leadership's desire to eradicate the embarrassing legacy of inferiority inherited from the Khrushchev incumbency. Underlying their judgment was an implicit belief that the Soviets, notwithstanding the persistent ideological bombast of their declaratory rhetoric, generally shared the logic of prevailing Western strategic philosophy, which held that a stable deterrent balance based on mutual vulnerability was the only feasible solution to the contemporary East-West security dilemma. By and large, these individuals voiced expectations (with varying degrees of confidence) that once the Soviets acquired an inventory of weapons sufficient to place them on an acknowledged footing of strategic equality with the United States, they would become willing to moderate the pace of their deployments and enter into arms control negotiations aimed at solidifying their newly-acquired status of parity with the West.

Subsequent events in Soviet-American relations have tendered mixed returns on the relative foresightedness of these opposing prognoses. There is little doubt in the minds of most observers that whatever their ultimate strategic calculations and goals might be, the Soviets were resolutely bent on catching up with the United States in all significant aspects of strategic power and regarded the attainment of numerical equality as an indispensable pre-

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